Instant Messaging Showdown

There are a lot of instant messaging apps out there and a lot of people using them. Here's a look at how a handful of the more notable IM apps stack up.

Yahoo! Messenger 5.0

Yahoo!'s entry into the instant messaging realm is simply called Yahoo! Messenger. It's a joy to use: simple, reliable, and stable. You can use it for private messages, private multiperson conferences, and public chat rooms.

Besides basic text messages, Yahoo! Messenger supports voice chat and Web conferencing. You can even set up a group voice conference or videoconference. You can also send files directly to chat buddies. A shared whiteboard is the only tool the program lacks for serious online collaboration.

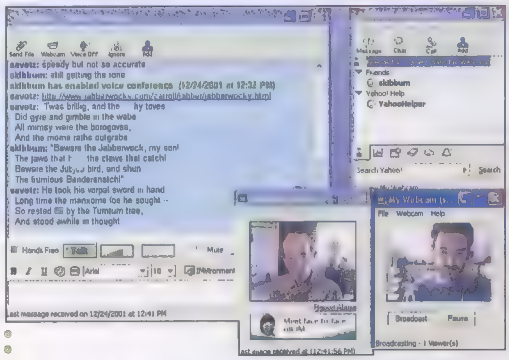
If you're interested in public chat rooms, you can create a profile and explore hundreds of Yahoo!'s chat rooms. Like private IMs, chat rooms can include voice and video. A full complement of privacy preferences lets you keep strangers in their places.

Yahoo! Messenger versions are available for Windows, Macintosh, FreeBSD, Linux, Palm OS, and Windows CE, so you should be able to talk to all of your online friends. There's also a version for some mobile phones and a Java version that works with other platforms or when you're using a public computer where you can't install the full client.

Messenger 5 adds a useless but fun feature called IMVironments, which are background themes, such as an animated fish tank, that appear in instant message windows. Yahoo! offers a library of these themes, which you can download and install in two seconds.

When you're not being deluged with messages from friends, the program can serve up personalized information, including stock quotes, a calendar, news, and local weather. The program integrates with your My Yahoo! account for these features. For instance, you can keep tabs on your Yahoo! Auctions bids, or if you've entered your stocks at finance.yahoo.com, you can track them within Messenger.

Yahoo! Messenger is intuitive to use (even for voice conferencing and videoconferencing) and offers the right balance of useful and fun features.



Yahoo! Messenger 5.0
Yahoo!
messenger.yahoo.com

AOL Instant Messenger 4.7

AOL Instant Messenger, known as AIM to its legions of users, is a sleek and satisfying messaging system. It's among the easiest to use and is one of the more stable IM applications around, but it's not the most feature-packed.

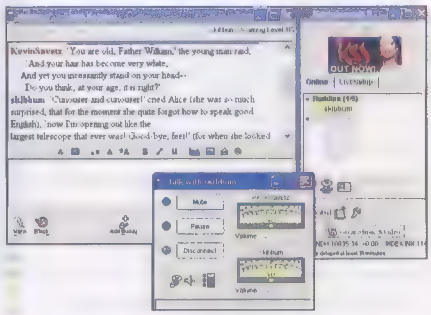
The program includes PC-to-PC voice chat, but you can only use the voice chat feature for one-on-one conversations. There's no group audio chat, as with Yahoo! Messenger. Although AIM's sound quality is good, the voice chat lacks push-to-talk functionality, which can be inconvenient. AIM doesn't do video chat, but you can send and receive files to and from other users. There's also a game function that lets you play multiplayer games with your buddies, but you must be on the same local network to do so.

If you're looking for new friends, you'll find a smattering of public chat rooms, but you're restricted to typing because the voice chat feature doesn't work in those public chat areas.

You don't need an AOL account to use AIM. If you use AOL, AIM's features are built into AOL. If you're not an AOL member, AIM is the easiest way to chat with friends who are members. If you already have an account with an AOL property, such as Netscape, CompuServe 2000, AOL Hometown, or AOL.com's Personal Finance center, you can use that account on AIM. That makes for one less password to remember.

There are versions of AIM for Windows, Macintosh, Linux, Palm, and Windows CE. A Java version called AIM Express lets you send instant messages without installing the full-blown client, and AIM Wireless lets you send and receive messages with a cellular phone. There's also a Netscape-branded version of AIM called Netscape Instant Messenger, which is virtually identical.

AIM isn't cluttered with many extraneous features, but there are a few outside the primary purview of instant messages and chat. The stock and news tickers serve up scrolling headlines, and the AIM Today page offers local weather and features, such as a horoscope and joke of the day. The Mail Alert feature can periodically



AOL Instant Messenger 4.7
AOL
www.aim.com

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless ... 2.5 = Absolutely Average ... 5 = Absolutely Perfect

check your POP e-mailboxes and alert you when you have new mail.

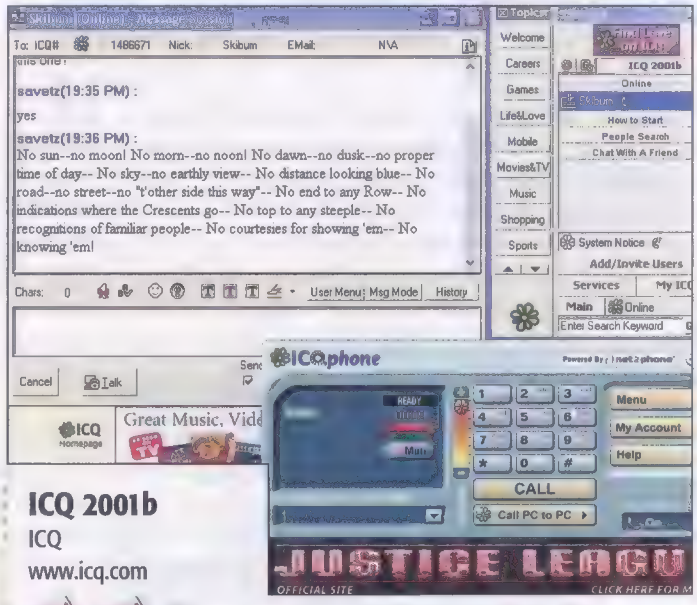
ICQ 2001b

ICQ is one of the oldest IM programs and a perfect example of a phenomenon known as "creeping featurism." In short, ICQ tries to do too many things, and as a result, it manages to do few of them well. The interface is a maze of buttons and windows that has grown into an unintuitive mess.

If you're willing to endure the interface, you will find advanced features and plenty of modes of communication. These include the ability to send alphanumeric pages and receive SMS messages to and from mobile phones. There's also a PC-to-phone feature for making inexpensive long-distance calls to standard telephones and a free PC-to-PC chat feature (which we couldn't get to work). The program also offers private text messages, private group chat, and public chat rooms. After installing external software, you can play multiplayer games, including canasta and Quake, with your pals.

ICQ puts special emphasis on its community features, including a directory for finding people who share your interests. Many of the community features are Web-based and exist outside of the application, such as personal Web sites, Web rings, and a white pages tool. The program also includes e-mail support. You can send and receive e-mail messages from within ICQ and get a free Web-based e-mail account through the site. A greeting card feature lets you send Web greetings to your chat pals.

ICQ is available for Windows, Macintosh, Windows CE, Palm OS, and Java. ICQ is a certainly a powerful messaging application, but be prepared to spend a lot of time exploring this messenger to find the features scattered throughout.


savetz(19:35 PM) :
yes
savetz(19:36 PM) :
No sun--no moon! No morn--no noon! No dawn--no dusk--no proper time of day-- No sky--no earthly view-- No distance looking blue-- No road--no street--no "t'other side this way"-- No end to any Row-- No indications where the Crescents go-- No top to any steeple-- No recognitions of familiar people-- No courtesies for showing 'em-- No knowing 'em!
ICQphone
CALL
JUSTICE LEAGU

ICQ 2001b
ICQ
www.icq.com

CPU CPU

MSN Messenger 4.6/Windows Messenger 4.5

Microsoft brings two instant messaging applications to the table: MSN Messenger and Windows Messenger. At first glance, the two are similar, but they are just incompatible enough to make you a little crazy. MSN Messenger will work with Windows 95/98/Me/2000/NT. Windows Messenger is built into XP and only works (for now) with that operating system.

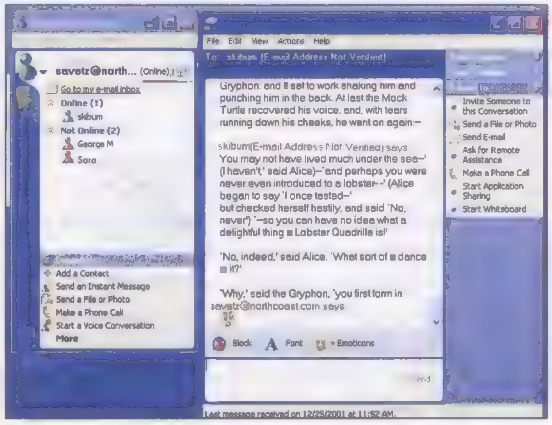
For just basic text messages between two or more people, the programs are compatible and work well. Beyond that, your mileage may vary.

The list of the programs' advanced features is impressive. They include audio and video chat, a whiteboard, and application sharing. But you may quickly find out there are hurdles to using those features. The audio, video, and whiteboard functions won't work if one of the users is behind a firewall. Other features include the ability to place inexpensive PC-to-phone calls and the ability to send files directly to your chat buddies, neither of which work if either user is behind a firewall.

Video chat doesn't work at all with MSN Messenger; it only works among XP users using Windows Messenger. More often than not, we were stuck with low-tech text-based instant messages.

You can find new friends in public chat rooms with MSN Messenger. Inexplicably, Windows Messenger doesn't support public chat rooms and offers no way to search for people based on common interests or any criteria except by name. Windows Messenger does support WinXP's .NET Passport feature but puts it to such dubious use you'll wonder why they bothered. From within Windows Messenger, you can receive .NET Alerts, shop for music, get fares for airline tickets, and do other tasks that belong in a Web browser.

These instant messaging tools are the least cross-platform friendly, as versions of MSN Messenger are only available for Windows, MacOS, and Pocket PCs. CPU



MSN Messenger 4.6 and Windows Messenger 4.5
Microsoft
messenger.msn.com

CPU CPU

by Kevin Savetz

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless CPU CPU 2.5 = Absolutely Average CPU CPU CPU CPU CPU 5 = Absolutely Perfect